

Everything in my life, everything in yours

I distinctly remember my grandfather's frustration over having to communicate with me in English, a foreign language. Though brought up only once, it resonates, haunting me. There are many possible explanations for my missing mother tongue. I grew up in a small town away from my grandparents and the larger Latvian immigrant community for one. I also suspect that the difficult trials and the taunting my parents encountered growing-up as 'outsiders' in 1950's Ontario helped dissuade any transfer of language to their children. Whatever the reason, I feel a pervasive disconnect, an internal shame for losing direct links to a culture that no doubt has shaped me. The thought of my relationship with my grandfather and other family members being lived out through translation troubles me. I fear something is lost.

My interest in Sara Angelucci's practice stems from a shared post-immigrant experience. Though born in Canada as the first generation of our families in a new country, our lives are profoundly affected by this 'other' place, the 'homeland': for Sara, Italy, for me, Latvia. The landscape of the 'homeland' is mapped internally, requiring excavation to reach understanding. Memories and artifacts are examined closely for clues, ways to cope with the loss and trauma of cultural displacement. Through photographic and video work, Sara Angelucci explores the friction between two lands, two cultures, and two languages. This task goes beyond identity and autobiography to a new approach, part self-ethnography and part cross-cultural narrative. A new-historical discourse is created, one deeply entrenched in constant translation. Although not directly experienced by Sara, the immigration of her family is an event that inscribed itself into her own identity well after the fact. Residual trauma of such change for her family, like mine, created a sense of living in-between for her.

My knowledge and attachment to this other significant and pervasive culture comes second hand, via circuitous channels. Yet, however distilled, the content is of central influence; however diluted and filtered, something remains which unquestionably binds me to this other place. I am grounded here, but I am a product of their cultural suspension. Therefore, I am also, to a certain degree, suspended. I am placed in the role of translator; literally, and figuratively I remain there, always translating from one culture to another. They have earned a better life for themselves and for us, their children. But, there was a price to pay. There was pain in their chosen exile. The experience and understanding of this suffering is also part of my inheritance (Angelucci, 3).

Unlike my indirect experiences of 'homeland,' Sara traveled to Italy and speaks the language, allowing for an articulate exploration of the internal landscape of immigration. Temporality makes comprehension difficult; the Italy Sara's parents knew is no longer a thing of the present but a mythical landscape suspended within them. Sara compares this internalized culture passed down to her from a time of rupture, her parents' immigration, with her own experiences in Italy and the new 'homeland', Canada. Her practice is one that traverses time mixing experiences direct and relayed to distill understanding.

While completing her Master of Fine Arts degree in Halifax, Sara was compelled to produce *America il Paradiso (America the Paradise)*. Her dislocation in a new city mirrored stories of her parents' displacement upon arrival at Pier 21 (Angelucci, 1). This meeting of temporalities at the transition point of Halifax inspired the construction of a new-historical document, both personal and community-based. Her parents' passing meant access to their first-hand accounts was no longer available. Without her parents' input as a point of reference, Sara developed new strategies to access lost personal histories deeply tied up in her own. This attempt to access memories of others, memories that none-the-less affect her, can be further described by Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory":

...postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (22).

In her installation *Questions She'll Never Answer* Sara Angelucci expresses a desire to cross the postmemory barrier. A black and white photograph of her mother on the ship bringing her to Canada is flanked by two videos, the sea on one side, a dress fluttering in the wind on the other (Jurakic, 4). Text appearing over the videos attempts to directly address Sara's lost mother, interrogating the black and white image by asking the colour of her dress and how it felt to have water all around. *Asking*, in this instance, is a postmemorial exercise: expecting no answers but still longing. *Questions She'll Never Answer* addresses the need for a translator, a role Sara fills in

America il Paradiso. Her postmemories combine with memories of other Italian immigrants, creating a multilayered cultural document.

America il Paradiso presents five individuals' tales of immigration sewn together with Sara's home movies. Participants shared their stories in letters responding to Sara's advertisement of the project. The silent Super-8 footage lacks context for the viewer until voice actors reading key points from the letters provide a counterpoint. Out of context, the Angelucci family films offer only posturing for the camera, a performance that seeks to emulate the North American experience. The cues and gestures presented must be correct to prove the immigrant family's successful integration. Richard Fung addresses this disconnect of background and performance when he states, "the shock of that initial encounter, the disjuncture between remembrance and apparent evidence, led me to question both my memory and the camera's version of my childhood" (11). Home movies are crucial for the immigrant family as proof, through seeming assimilation into dominant culture, of attainment of the '(North) American Dream.' In this way home movies are more about the public sphere than the interiority of the home. For example, footage used in Sara's video depicts a number of special events, of going 'somewhere' or even showing off a hard-worked-on garden for posterity. These images are about family status just as much as they are about documentation. With the difficulty of breaking through the heavy posturing in the home-movie footage, it is Sara's strategy to look closely, to slow down and zoom in to examine gestures. Within her video, close-ups of the Super-8 source are occasionally pixilated, making the search for accidental moments that trigger memory and postmemory difficult. Letters of five members of her parents' and/or grandparents' generation(s) allow the video to create a necessary counterpoint to draw meaning out of the familial images.

Anecdotes provided from Italian immigrants are the verbal narrative that drives *America il Paradiso*. The authors are not identified, only referenced in the end credits and suggested through the use of different voices and the visual device of superimposed text on screen. This melding creates a meta-narrative and at the same time Sara's family narrative specifically. The struggles and regrets of participating immigrants also speaks to similar experiences of her family. The complex layers of *America il Paradiso*, the borrowed memories and questioning of postmemory, are eloquently summarized in Sara's account of translating for her grandmother. Sara's only voice-over provides the context of pain and loss of family history and collective memory. Once her grandmother's translator, Sara had to

create a new language after her grandmother's stroke. Both frustrated by a dual loss of verbal articulation and comprehension, they patched together a modified version of Italian. Renamed, Sara became 'Aaarrra,' and new phrases spoken with a new voice repaired the link between them. After her grandmother's passing, this unique hybrid language was lost. Translation is about more than problems of communication. It attempts to connect with the memories of others despite losing meaning with every added layer of distance.

In a Hundred creates a dialogue between Sara and her family's home movies, as well as between film and video. Sara embodies her mother in performance, emulating her movements and recreating Super-8 film footage. Walking in the garden toward vibrant red flowers, Sara's mother makes fleeting glances at the camera and fidgets with her hands. Sara's imitation of this document is seen through exaggerated flickering and drained colours that do not match the original. The new is made old and the old is made new, almost. Film is assimilated into video, projector sounds over both components romanticize historic and simulated performance. The projector's hum represents not only the artifice of video-masquerading-as-film, but also the new identity of film-footage-as-video after its transfer to signal. Sara's performance as her mother is an act of tracing. Gestures and looks are embodied, studied, but to what end? This time-travel experiment can only be parallel; the performance cannot cross into a further understanding of her mother at the time of the footage. Yet this is not just another inquiry either, a continuation of *Questions She'll Never Answer*. The dialogue of tenses, Sara's participation and interaction with the footage of the past illustrates the creative power of postmemory. As the piece flows into more home-movie segments, a written text appears on screen over another image of Sara's mother smiling, looking directly at the camera this time. This close-up is confident as her eyes lock with the camera and the text imposed at the bottom of the frame reads: "I imagine it's the happiest she ever was." The text slowly drops away to state "it's the happiest she ever was" and so on, moving from the desire for this to be true to the thought that it must be. Every word is given full consideration before it falls away. The mournful "she ever was" becomes the haunting trauma of the singular word "was," as in past, inaccessible.

Quite different from *America il Paradiso* and *In a Hundred*, *Snow* presents subjects that are not necessarily Sara's family. In fact, little of her home movies are used, creating a haunting piece not reliant on the personal. The medium of home movies is *Snow's* subject. Formally the piece is constructed from moments at the end of filmstrips where

small white dots appear. A marking system, the white dots are indicators to change the strip. In the moments following their appearance only light shines through the projector as the film is coiled and collected on the other reel. In *Snow* many incongruous moments get spliced together, all end bits with holes of light just as important as the decontextualized subjects depicted. The slowed footage and white dots dancing before us, obscuring the final scene, emphasize the frustration of what home movies can and cannot provide. These snippets, although capable of triggering memory, often leave the viewer with further questions. As Sara insightfully observes, the white dots are the literal *punctum* (27), Barthes's idea of the unexpected piercing moment that strikes a deeper chord in the viewer. In this case, every time the dots appear we experience anxiety as we know the film has run its course. I would add that these dots as *punctum* trigger the overwhelming sense of Susan Sontag's *momento mori* (15). *Snow's* many ends are tied together in a sorrowful funeral march as all subjects of the juxtaposed footage have ended or will end, just as the film. What do these snippets tell us about these people, why were these events important? These questions are heightened as the viewer is struck with so little. The constant filmic death-throws appear as obituaries. The white dots are flowers to mourn the subjects, or memory's failure. As it is with reading newspaper obituaries, without the personal context images recede into forgetting.

Departing from home movies as a source, *Double Take* employs recreation and interview as narrative strategies. Twin sisters, one on each side of a split screen, simultaneously address the camera regarding the same event. Their voices overlap, making comprehension difficult. The retelling of a traumatic event, witnessing their grandmother's death, brings out nuances of memory recall unique to each individual. Though depicted by actors, the experience described is based on that of Sara's twin sisters. Only five years old at the time, and the only ones present, they are the only link to the event. Access is obscured by the age of the young witnesses and the many environmental and secondary details that are remembered differently between them. There are many layers of disconnection in *Double Take*: two inconsistent stories, the use of actors, their overlapping speech, and Sara not being present for the event herself. Eleven at the time, Sara shared a special bond with her grandmother through their hybrid language, described in *America il Paradiso*. Sara's grandmother was a bridge to her cultural background and language. She would look after Sara and her siblings while both parents worked. The loss of Sara's grandmother is a trauma that rattles connections between her and the second self within. The need to live that moment,

to be present, to have closure and the impossibility of this desire is illustrated in *Double Take*. The linguistics alter every time the event is spoken/passed on. For Sara, the translation will never be profound enough to express her trauma. The lack, the missing memory, will continue to affect her in the same way her family's immigration has, as an event not directly experienced but lived with and explored.

Looking outside as opposed to in, *When the Cricket Sings* is a re-working of and contemplation on the problematic field of ethnography. Completed during a residency in Shanghai, the video embodies the ethnographic project in its attempt to convey a particular area and its inhabitants on the cusp of disappearing with the redevelopment/expansion of the urban. As Sara mentions in her description of the video, these neighbourhoods and the unique street life at night seem 'endangered.' In one take the video pans slowly across the shops and the people who frequent them on the busy street, never stopping. The camera placed in a backpack, with a hole cut out for the lens, sits in the basket on the back of Sara's bicycle, allowing for the extraordinary glimpse as she walks her bike down the street. The lens is set to frame the interior spaces of the shops as she walks by capturing fleeting moments of the internal while the pedestrians and their activities on the street blend into the shot in varying degrees of focus. This one-take document navigates the problems of looking, of representing the 'other,' by only passing by, seeing in glimpses and ultimately forgetting. Sara, as traveler, has known the struggles and richness of cultural 'otherness' within, offering the perspective needed for respectful discourse. Similar to the immigrant experience internalized in her other works, *When the Cricket Sings* is about internal loss manifested externally in the changing landscape of the neighbourhood depicted. As the redevelopment of the area takes hold, the inhabitants become immigrants in their own space. Mourning this 'othering,' *When the Cricket Sings* is a document tied to nostalgia, one that romanticizes the present as past in expectation of the monumental shifts to come before they have been fully realized.

Though Sara and I have similar experiences of a culturally inscribed interior 'homeland,' the details are quite different. Translation between selves is a necessary navigation in our lives, and the lives of others in similar circumstances. Sara's practice is diligent in sharing the space she has come to occupy culturally, to depict the problems, issues, and longings of her inheritance of a fractured identity and incomplete memories. Old photographs and home movies are unraveled in her work, locating more questions than meanings.

Memories are not pinned down but suggested and interrogated. As members of the first generation after immigration, we live not in regret, but rather in curiosity of the place that was once home for our families. Even when we visit the 'old country' we don't have access to the place of the stories passed on to us, the postmemories given to us that we did not live. We will always long for this place of myth, as our families did, but live beyond, as they did too.